DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 409 148 RC 021 101

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TITLE Moving Beyond the Status Quo: Narrative of the Sharecropper's Daughter.
PUB DATE 27 Mar 97
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, March 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; Achievement Need; *Blacks; Case Studies; *Educational Attainment; Educational Attitudes; Educational Experience; Elementary Secondary Education; Family Role; *Females; Higher Education; *Mother Attitudes; Parent Child Relationship; *Parent Influence; Poverty; Rural Education; *Student Motivation; Success

ABSTRACT

This case study examines factors that enabled a black female to achieve a significantly higher educational status than her parents. "Susie" was born in 1942 to parents who were poor sharecroppers. Her family included an older sister and three younger siblings. Out of concern for their oldest child who was handicapped, Susie's parents decided that Susie would walk the 3 miles to school with her sister. As a result, Susie attended a multigraded school for a full year before beginning first grade. In fifth grade, Susie received the highest score on an achievement test. When Susie reached eighth grade, her family moved and she and her siblings had to walk 3 miles to catch the bus to the high school 15 miles away. This change in school and location widened Susie's horizons, as she was exposed to students from various socioeconomic backgrounds. She went on to graduate 4th in a class of 66. In college, she was competing with an even greater variety of students than in the city high school. Susie met this challenge by completing bachelor's, master's, and educational specialist degrees. The attitude of Susie's parents toward schooling and education played a significant role in her motivation to achieve. Though her mother and father had only an elementary school education, they desperately wanted their children to have more opportunities than they had. Susie's mother was a role model for her children; worked hard all of her life; and was actively involved in church, school, and community. Susie retired after 30 years in public education and is on the boards of numerous volunteer organizations. This case study demonstrates the specific family attitudes, events, and experiences that contributed to an individual's success. (LP)

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Moving Beyond the Status Quo:

Narrative of the Sharecropper's Daughter

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the
American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL
March 27, 1997

RC 021101

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The family plays a significant role in the acquisition of literacy and the development of the children. It is this family context that also provides education before the years of formal schooling occur. This early experience in the literate traditions of the family can produce or contribute to the cycle of similar educational attainment among parents and offspring. The cycle may continue as the offspring begin families of their own, socializing their children at the same level of literate tradition. Such a cycle maintains the sense of equality described by Husen (1975) as well as the status quo of the community. It is important to note that parents may have limited formal schooling and be highly literate and have developed complex problem-solving skills (Taylor, 1993). The generalization that lack of formal schooling equates with illiteracy is not always an accurate assessment of families. Kozol (1991) reminds us of the critical situations of those families who are caught in the cycle of illiteracy and poverty. When this cycle is broken, differential educational attainment may take place. This occurs more frequently in the form of offspring attaining higher levels of formal education than parents, though it may occur in other directions.

The purpose of this study was to examine why and how a person with a background described as poor, whether economical, experiential, or both, can fracture the mold set by the parents and achieve a significantly higher educational level than that achieved by the parents.

Since the subject of this study is a black woman, additional factors must be explored. In the book, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, Jones (1985) provides an extensive description of the experiences of black women from slavery to the present. She discussed the plight of black women

during the period of slavery and traced the development and change in the role of black women in society to the present. Following the end of slavery, the roles black women held in society changed very little during the reconstruction period, and these roles continued to evolve slowly even during the early 20th century. Women in general (white women) worked for lower wages than did men, and blacks worked for lower wages than did whites (Jones, 1985; see also Harlan, 1968). Black women were in the bottom position in the hierarchy and received the lowest wages. Even with programs such as the Works Progress Administration and the New Deal, "the necessary commitment on the part of government, union, and private enterprise to open the nation's job structure to black women would not even begin to take shape until the mid-1960s" (Jones, 1985, p. 221).

The theoretical orientation of the study acknowledged that there are specific family attitudes, events, and experiences that contribute to an individual's ability to achieve significantly higher educational status than his/her parents achieved (Duncan, et al., 1972; Temple and Polk, 1986; Taylor, 1983; Husen, 1975; Husen and Tuijnman, 1991). To examine this theory more carefully, the question was raised: what factors were/are involved in the case of the sharecropper's daughter as she attained significantly higher educational status than her parents?

Methodology

A case study design was used with the subject, a black female, whose parents were sharecroppers during her youthful days. This method was chosen because of the characteristics common to case studies: complex, holistic descriptions involving a myriad of variables that are not highly isolated (Stake, 1978). The bounds of this study included Susie, her recent administrative position, and the time from her childhood to her current position.

Research procedures included four interviews, conducted over a one month period, with the subject(3) and with her mother(1), and one additional interview with the subject, conducted several years later. Data from these interviews included family attitudes, events, and experiences and provided the base for analysis.

The subject, Susie, is a black female who achieved significantly higher educational attainment than did either of her parents. For this study, the term *significantly higher* was defined as a minimum of four years difference, with the offspring completing a least a bachelor's degree. Susie completed the bachelor's, master's, and educational specialist degrees, while her mother and father completed the sixth and seventh grades, respectively. Her childhood included attending segregated schools in a rural area of a southeastern state of the United States. Recently, she retired after 30 years in public education in both teaching and administrative positions, all in the same state in which she was reared. The culmination of this career included 10 years in an appointed high level administrative position in an independent city school system located near a major metropolitan area in the Southeast.

Procedures included the development of an interview guide prior to the first interview, designed to address educational issues in chronological order of occurrence (Brenner, Brown, and Carter, 1985). This guide was completed during two interview sessions and an interview guide for Susie's mother was constructed, utilizing data from Susie's interviews. This design allowed verification and clarification of issues, in addition to an alternative perspective for certain situations. Two additional guides were used, one emphasizing Susie's philosophy of the educational process, and one focusing on her early family, including grandparents and recollections of her mother's life.

All interviews were audio recorded and each was transcribed before the next interview was conducted. This schedule permitted changes and requests for clarification and elaborations in the following interviews.

The analysis was an ongoing process as each interview was conducted and each tape transcribed. The theoretical orientation focused on specific family attitudes, events, and experiences that contributed to Susie's ability to succeed. Statements in the transcripts that supported or verified this theory were underlined and provide the framework for the rich data reported in the following section.

Results and Discussion

The subject, Susie, was born in 1942 to parents who were sharecroppers in a rural county in a southeastern state in the United States. The house in which they lived belonged to the man who owned the land they were sharecropping. The subject's mother explained that they worked for "halves," keeping half of the profit for themselves and giving half to the land owner. After completing high school, the subject continued through college, through not without events of significance occurring within the family. Throughout the formal schooling and later teaching and administrative experience, the early years at home continued to make an impact on her choices and success.

The family in which she grew up included one sister, a year older, a brother, a year younger, a sister 12 years younger, a sister 20 years younger, and a sister 21 years younger. Susie describes the siblings as three groups of children. The house in which they lived was owned by the man who owned the land they were sharecropping. It was wired for electricity several years after Susie's birth, though it never had an indoor bathroom while they lived there.

When the oldest daughter was old enough to go to school, the parents were concerned with her walking by herself the three miles to the red two-room schoolhouse that served the black students in the area. She had "a touch of the rheumatic fever" (personal interview) when she was younger and was somewhat handicapped. The parents decided that the solution was to have Susie walk with her to school. This meant that Susie was attending school, sitting in a multi-grade classroom for a full year before beginning first grade. Kindergarten and Head Start were not available at that time, yet Susie was able to have advance experience in schooling.

Susie began first grade the following year and continued through the early grades. In fifth grade, she was given a type of achievement test on which she made the highest score in the school, including the sixth and seventh grades. Her teacher recommended, and her parents agreed, to move her up to sixth grade in mid-year. It was at this time that the family moved to a nearby county where they continued sharecropping. Their new home was constructed of concrete block, though the interior was unfinished, and there was no indoor bathroom.

When Susie and her siblings reached eighth grade, they had to walk three miles to catch the bus to the high school in town, fifteen miles away. This change in schools and locations also widened the horizons for Susie, for they were no longer only with families of other sharecroppers. Susie remembered,

> ...that was when I realized, probably, just how poor we were, because this was a city school. And the city kids all dressed nice. You know, several pairs of shoes. And here we were, driven in on a bus from the country, and most of us were poor. (personal interview)

Though this might have provided a social challenge, Susie experienced no academic difficulty and graduated as number four in her class of sixty-six. One event of significance did occur less than one week before the high school graduation. The older sister, with whom Susie had attended class, since the middle of the sixth grade, became critically ill and died, rather suddenly. The emotional trauma of this situation almost caused Susie to give up her desire to attend college, a desire she had acquired in early high school, and which had provided the impetus for her to secure financial aid to attend a black college in the state. Her mother proved to be the rock of strength, telling Susie what the older sister had said before she died, "Before she died, she told me this, said 'if I don't go to college, let Susie go.' I said, if my head stay hot, both of you going. She said, 'Mama, I aint'..."" (personal interview). Susie began her first year in college.

As she entered college, she realized that she was now competing with an even greater variety of students than when she was in the city high school. This realization provided a challenge which she met successfully, completing her bachelor's degree and beginning her teaching career in a segregated junior high school.

The attitude of Susie's parents toward schooling and education were evidenced in conversations with Susie and with her mother. Though her mother and father had hardly completed junior high school, both parents wanted desperately for their children to have more opportunity than they had. The motto of Susie's mother was, "where there's a will, there will be a way made" (personal interview) and her conviction and dedication to this motto was evident in her voice as she spoke the words. Susie remembers that her mother always said, "I want you to do better than I have ever done" (personal interview).

Events and experiences that provided further understanding for Susie's success focus on her mother and the model she provided in early years as well as later in life. When the family was sharecropping, Susie's mother worked in the field with the family. When their own crops were finished, they worked for others, earning $2.00 for picking a hundred pounds of cotton. Susie recalled how skilled her mother was in picking cotton and how she taught Susie to do the same. The money made in this work was used to buy school clothes.

Throughout Susie's college years, her mother worked as maid and sent Susie $2.50 per week (all that she made). Susie worked also when she was in college, and at the end of the month when she was paid, she sent the money back to her mother. Somewhere in this exchange, her mother managed to save money. In fact, in the mid-seventies, when their family was no longer sharecropping, and the house in which the landowner had lived was up for sale, Susie's mother purchased the house, paying in cash. When I inquired about her reference to her mother buying the house, rather than her mother and father, Susie explained that she used these terms because "I guess my mother was the first one who owned some property, I mean actually owned it right out....my mother is the one who saved the money for it.... But my dad, I guess, didn't see the real value in that because the only thing he was accustomed to working for somebody else and not having anything of your own" (personal interview).

Giving to others and serving the community seemed to be guiding principles for both Susie's mother and now for Susie. She had watched her mother be actively involved in every facet of the church, the school, and the community throughout her life. With such a model, it may not be surprising to hear Susie say "I retired in 1994...so that I could serve my community better"

(personal interview). Currently she is active on more than 20 boards and organizations and is director of a school that will open in Fall 1997.

She openly reflects on her activities and compares her own interests with those of her siblings. Clearly, her siblings acknowledge her as being just like their mother, and they share varying degrees of the same spirit. Susie describes all her siblings as successful, with their activities ranging from operating their own business, to completing college, serving in the armed forces, and even recently being ordained as a minister. She now has the opportunity to look to the future as her daughter has recently married, and holds a position in an accounting firm. Susie says, "She's a lot like me. Not totally, but a lot like me. She's very kind and considerate of people. She words hard. She enjoys doing volunteer" (personal interview).

Conclusions

Specific family attitudes, events, and experiences that contributed to the subject's ability to succeed were related throughout the interviews. Categories that were identified included socio-economic status, parental education, parental attitudes toward education, geographical location, sub-culture of the community, school facilities, teacher competence, and programs available. The relationship of parental attitude toward education, teacher competence, and programs available to the subject were especially critical in determining why the subject was able to achieve a significantly higher educational level than her parents.

Through a variety of experiences, this subject was able to move beyond the status quo that might have held her in a cycle, and was able to far exceed the formal schooling that her parents experienced. Her mother concisely stated the method through which this break was able to occur

when she said, "where there's a will, there will be a way made." The subject, Susie, confirmed her mother's operational philosophy as she reflected that her mother always said, "I want you to do better than I have ever done." As educators struggling with achievement, performance-assessment, outcomes-based education, and related issues, it is critical that we have a better understanding of the influence of the home environment and its relationship to the process of schooling. We must go beyond the generalizations of economic disability or racial stereotypes and dissect the nature of the "will" that this mother spoke about so that we can design curricula and implementation strategies that will effectively meet the needs of students in our changing world (Gadsden, 1996).

Further analysis of these data should be conducted, with attention to black/white issues not addressed here. Racial issues have been dealt with by Epstein (1973), Harrington and Gumpert (1981), College Entrance Examination Board (1985), Higginbotham (1985), and Jones (1985). Analysis may show that differential educational attainment cannot be detached from racial issues, particularly the role of black women in our society. We must continue to examine the characteristics specific to certain groups and attempt to determine reasons/causes for success among these groups.

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